



Disrupting Power from Las Rajaduras

Alejandra A. Fernández Morgado, Ph.D.
University of Minnesota-Duluth

Abstract: I was a child when I was first captivated by the energy of the parties my neighbors, Ilea and Cucho, would have. When I was eighteen, I dipped my toes in the waters of La Regla de Osha for the first time. I have since spent decades swimming in it, being healed by it, and nurturing my faith because of it and other spiritual paths my journey has taken me onto. I put it away, like a secret when I began studying to become a teacher. Throughout the years after, I eventually opened up to some, but overall stayed quiet about my beliefs because I thought the academic world and the spiritual world could not exist in the same space. Following the summer of a biopsy scare, during my third year in my doctoral program and final year in K-12 classrooms, I found Gloria Anzaldúa and testimonio, and my worlds began to merge. My research began to expand from one quantitative study to a three-study dissertation that also included a systematic literature review and post-qualitative inquiry. My post-qualitative inquiry was a testimonio of resistance that included all of my work until then, alongside the belief systems that had been my foundation in persisting and resisting systemic bias within the ivory towers of K-12 and academia that are perpetually trying to marginalize Latinas. Grounded in testimonio traditions (Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Pérez Huber, 2008; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) in both theory and praxis, along with post-qualitative inquiry (Kuntz, 2015, 2021) and translanguaging/linguistic justice (Aponte-Safe et al., 2022; Díaz, 2008; Torres & Vásquez, 2012), this work embraces storytelling as a means of survival and transformative knowledge-making. This is my story from the cracks/las rajaduras (Anzaldúa, 2015) – one voice to join the collective voices seeking to shift paradigms and disrupt the powers that try to force us to assimilate, hide, and silence who we are.

Keywords: testimonio, resistance, spirituality, rajaduras, Latina

Citation:

Fernández Morgado, A.A. (2025). Disrupting Power from Las Rajaduras. *Current Issues in Education*, 26(3). <https://doi.org/10.14507/cie.vol26iss3.2340>

Accepted: 10/09/2025

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Writing invokes an omniscient, omnipresent state - something like channeling, something like stream-of-consciousness - where the page becomes a portal, allowing me to travel back and forth, and beyond. This is what comes to mind as I sit here recordando, within this trial of my hero's journey (Campbell, 1949). This part of my journey is about being a Cuban American woman, a multilingual educator, a recent doctoral graduate, existing within the world of academia, while trying to honor her spirituality, which intersects different belief systems and practices (La Regla de Osha, Buddhism, Catholicism, Reiki, crystal therapy, astrology, divination).

As a Cuban American woman navigating academic institutions historically designed without us in mind, I lean into testimonio not only as a method, but as a way of remembering and resisting—a collective practice of truth-making (Kuntz, 2015, 2021) and survival, grounded in storytelling as resistance (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Testimonio becomes an epistemological stance through which the personal is political (Pérez Huber, 2008; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) and lived experience is theory. Writing, then, becomes a woven act of hauntology (Varga, 2024), Wonder and divination (MacLure, 2013, 2020, 2022)—a sensing across time, calling forth the voices that linger and insist on being heard across time—a place where memory, intuition, and relation guide what emerges, transforming into spiritual activism (Anzaldúa, 2015).

This post-qualitative inquiry (Kuntz, 2015, 2021) resists methodological containment, treating knowledge as relational, emergent, and ethically co-constructed. Within this space of translanguaging—where languages, memories, and meanings flow without translation—the pursuit of linguistic justice (Aponte-Safe et al., 2022; Díaz, 2008; Torres & Vásquez, 2012) takes form.

Engaging these important, yet distinct, theoretical landscapes, I choose to dwell in the Borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2015) between them—blending rather than enacting their borders. Like a Cuban ajíaco simmering slowly, where meats, vegetables, and spices, meld together into a rich and inseparable whole, truth-making, translanguaging, testimonio, Anzaldúa's concepts, hauntology, divination, and Wonder deepen and enrich one another's flavor within the Borderlands of theory contained within my Hero's Journey. Here, truth is not fixed but felt—shaped by movement between tongues and times, carried by echoes that refuse to be erased.

Prequel to Rajaduras

The warm summer sunset filled the skies with hues of oranges and glimpses of blues, still trying to maintain their earlier dominance. Within the colors peering between the openings of the chalice windows above the wicker sofa in my grandparents' living room, the primordial sounds of drums from my neighbor's home traveled through the warm evening, sparking my awareness of the shadowy figures of guests entering their home.

When I was a child, I was captivated by the energy of the parties my neighbors, Ilea and Cucho, would host. I would sit for hours watching and listening, enthralled with the lively contrast to my own sobering home filled with angst and frustration.

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My Tía was the only refuge within my home. You could see the weight of the energy on her, but she resisted it to remain close to her sister, my grandmother.

My Tía, with her short gray hair, and light eyes, one slightly bigger than the other, indicative of previous diabetic crises, once carried long, luscious waves of dark hair that she sacrificed to La Caridad del Cobre for her father's health.

When I was older, I learned that the sacrifice was probably to Oshún, the Yoruban goddess of love, fertility, women, and children, often syncretized in Cuba with La Caridad del Cobre.

This practice of syncretism in the Caribbean and other countries began by people who were kidnapped, enslaved, and brought from Africa, and needed to preserve their beliefs by hiding them. They did so by syncretizing their Yoruban deities with that of their kidnappers' Catholic saints such as the Yoruban goddess, Oshún, with the Catholic saint, La Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity).

I heard that story throughout my childhood, along with others my mother shares. My mom would reminisce, remembering when she was a child seated near my Abuela and Tía at the home of an espiritista. That day she recalls the medium channeling the deity syncretized with la Virgen de las Mercedes, Obatalá. She remembers the medium seeming to almost grow in front of her. This was the first time she ever witnessed anything like this. That moment led her to doors of different beliefs and practices. My mom then brought me to the threshold of many of my beliefs, one of them being La Regla de Osha.

Being 16 in the Spirals in My Hero's Journey

I have always been drawn to the world of mythology and symbolism, and the parallels and patterns one finds while delving into these ideas that further the understanding of how we make sense in and of our worlds. When I was 16, I was introduced to Joseph Campbell and the Hero's Journey (HJ; Campbell, 1949; Campbell & Moyers, 1991). It taught me how to frame life lessons in ways that provide perspective and distance. It showed me how patterns and symbolism can help me anticipate recurring moments the universe provides as a way to evolve. Through this lens, I became interested in ideas and beliefs that were aligned with the HJ, and as a result, I gravitated towards the world of metaphysics.

I remember carefully walking down over rocks at my nearby park that faced the water. There, I would sit, holding my rose quartz and amethyst crystals within my laced fingers, creating a basket, allowing the ocean water to dance and cleanse them as I prayed for their energies to help me.

It was around this time that my mom had fallen on a sidewalk, and I remember sitting in the waiting room of Jackson's emergency room, while her and my stepfather were inside. Surrounded by people, I was pulled into a world of reincarnation through Brian Weiss' *Many Lives, Many Masters* (1988). I became enthralled with the ideas of past lives and suddenly my mom's recent proximity to Buddhism became more tangible to me and years later, I would take refuge with my daughter who was born to the sounds of the mantras of the Medicine Buddha and in the yellow protective light of Oshún. Throughout my life, I have relied mainly on what I have learned throughout Buddhism, astrology, and La Regla de Osha to weave through life.

La Regla de Osha. Throughout my life this practice, called La Regla de Osha or most commonly, Santería, has evolved across regions, adapting to its surroundings, while remaining deeply rooted in Yoruban-based traditions. Though often still treated as taboo, its integration into

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the fabric of Caribbean culture—especially through the syncretism of Yoruban deities with Catholic saints—has led to what many refer to as Cuban Saints¹, rendering the practice more socially acceptable.

During my young adulthood, I dipped my toes in the waters of La Regla de Osha for the first time. Although I am sure I had previous interactions, my first memory of interacting with this belief system was when I was 19 or 20. I had been told I had a dark energy near me, one that was in love with me and did not want anyone else to have me even if that meant my death in the process. I remember not being allowed to leave the practitioner's house until they removed whatever entity was making things dangerous for me. I left changed.

My other vibrant memories were also at that priestess' house, now my *Madrina*. I remember being pregnant, in *el cuarto de los santos*, surrounded by pumpkins, yellow ribbons, candles and my mother's hand. I was seeking protection from Oshún for my daughter. I later remember standing in the same *cuarto de los santos* years later, asking her which deity she thought ruled my head. I remember her and her husband looking at each other, and we all knew, despite my deep ties to Oshún, I knew who it would be.

This home would see the initiation of my mother, daughter, husband, and it is where I would receive Oshún many years later. I have spent decades swimming in La Regla de Osha, being healed by it, and nurturing my faith because of it, along with other spiritual and metaphysical paths my journey has taken me onto such as Buddhism, astrology, divination, and Reiki.

Within Las Rajaduras

I put all of these beliefs away, like a secret, when I began studying to become a special education teacher. I had learned early on that certain ways of knowing—intuition, spirituality, ancestral wisdom—were seen as incompatible with academic or professional legitimacy. I didn't want people to think I was a freak, or worse, to have my intelligence and capacity discredited because of how taboo my belief system might appear to others. So I tucked it all into the shadows: the rituals, the dreams, the signs I had always read in the world around me. I thought I had to choose between being taken seriously and being fully myself.

But diving into the world of special education, something unexpected happened. I met mentors—brilliant, grounded individuals—who did not dismiss the unseen. They recognized that education, especially special education, is deeply spiritual work. They spoke of energy, of intuition, of listening beyond what can be measured. They taught me that honoring the whole child meant first learning to honor the whole self, belief systems included. These mentors became mirrors and guides, reminding me that my spiritual knowing was not a liability but a source of strength—an anchor in a field that often feels mechanized, bureaucratic, and disconnected from the soul.

It was through these relationships that I began to stitch together what I had once split apart—my intellect and my intuition, my scholarship and my spirituality, my voice and my silence. It was the beginning of my return.

¹This was one of the prevailing themes from my third post-qualitative inquiry referenced later in this piece. Of the six participants (myself being one) in my inquiry, all who identified as Latina Caribbean educators, the term Cuban Saints was used in referring to saints that were a resulting syncretism of Catholic Saints with the Yoruban-based deities, known as Orishas.

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A bachelor's in education

At a community college in South Florida, my first special education professor, Dr. Tate, saw something in me before I saw it in myself. She knew I had a deep interest in gifted education, and I still hear her words as clearly as the day she said them: “*Give special education a chance. I’m not saying to turn away from gifted—just give it a chance. I think you’d be great. You can always go back to gifted.*” There was something in her voice—firm, but kind, almost prophetic. It was an invitation I didn’t fully understand at the time, but I listened.

As I neared the end of my bachelor’s program, I was placed at a K–12 center for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities for my internship. It was a placement many people avoided—*too hard, too heavy, too much*—but it ended up being a threshold moment. My internship professor and on-site mentor were both deeply spiritual and religious. They didn’t push their beliefs, but they modeled what it meant to lead with purpose and humility, to treat teaching as a calling, not just a job. They spoke—sometimes subtly, sometimes directly—about the emotional labor of special education and the need for something deeper to sustain you. They hinted at a knowing that went beyond strategies and behavior plans—something rooted in faith, in presence, in a belief that transformation was always possible, even for students the system had all but given up on.

That experience cracked something open in me. In the spaces between data collection and de-escalation, I started to feel the sacred in the everyday—the ways we held space for rage and grief, the tiny glimmers of trust that emerged in classrooms built on rupture. I didn’t have language for it yet, but I was beginning to understand what Dr. Tate meant. Special education wasn’t a detour; it was a calling of its own—a return to something deeply human, deeply relational, and profoundly needed.

La Sawesera

Over time, I slowly began opening up about my beliefs—carefully, selectively—especially in spaces where it felt just a little safer to do so. One of those spaces was the elementary school I worked at nestled within a section of Miami, Little Havana, a neighborhood that, like me, held layers of diasporic memory, ritual, and resistance. There, it felt slightly more possible to be both a bruja and an educator—to hold my incense and my Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in the same hands.

I’ll never forget being asked to help bless the school alongside a Babalawo one early spring morning, just before the start of state testing. We arrived at 6 a.m., the building still cloaked in the purple-orange shadows of dawn. Together, we prayed over the school—its corners, its walls, its rooms. We called in clarity, protection, and ease for the children. That year, the school, having been rated as a D school, was placed under the supervision of the Education Transformation Office, a district department tasked with supporting schools that were struggling to meet the testing benchmarks or other academic performance standards. However, it ended with us earning a B. Some might call it a coincidence; I knew it was alignment.

At that school, I taught students with varying exceptionalities in a resource classroom. I pulled small groups from their general education settings and worked with them intensely, often one-on-one. These students had been labeled by their challenges—by what they couldn’t do, how they didn’t fit. But I saw something else in many of them: brilliance that refused to be boxed in.

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One of those students was Eddie. I met him in kindergarten and immediately knew—knew in the way brujas and good teachers know—that he was gifted. He was already reading far above grade level and could recite facts about the planets with the fervor of a scientist. In first grade, we struck a deal: he would complete his required work, and then I would let him research any planet he wanted. He devoured books on Jupiter, Saturn, black holes, solar storms.

I advocated for him to be evaluated for gifted services, but it took time—too much time. The school psychologist was skeptical, and I remember her telling me, “*I don’t know why I’m doing this—he isn’t [gifted]*”. But when she returned, visibly surprised, she admitted, “*You were right. He is gifted.*” I looked at her and simply said, “*I know. I told you.*”

Eddie changed the course of my life. Through him, I found my way back to my original passion—gifted education—but now with a critical lens informed by special education. His story showed me what it meant to be twice-exceptional—to be both gifted and disabled, to hold brilliance and struggle at once. Later, I would come to understand there was another layer: multilingualism and multiculturalism. He was not just twice-exceptional, having both ability and disability, but thrice-exceptional, navigating ability, disability, language, culture, and systemic bias all at once.

Despite my growing passion and emerging expertise, my school was reluctant to support me in pursuing gifted certification. They needed special education teachers, and I was filling a gap. But I couldn’t ignore the calling any longer. I wanted to help create systems that saw students like Eddie in their full complexity. So, I left that district and began walking toward what I knew was mine to do.

A Chain of Islands Frozen in Time

My new district, 32 miles south from Miami, both more suburban and far more white, was nestled in a place many people only dream of visiting, surrounded by sparkling blue waters, mangroves reaching skyward, and lands that, at first glance, seemed less touched by development. Each morning, I crossed the narrow stretches of highway that connected the mainland to this string of islands, watching the sun rise over the ocean like a daily blessing. Boats sat quietly in the stillness of dawn, and for a moment, I felt suspended in something holy. The chaotic hum of the city gave way to a tranquil rhythm that felt like meditation. I remember thinking: “*This is healing.*”

But what appeared serene on the surface held something far more unsettling beneath. I could have never predicted that this—this paradise that drew millions for rest and recreation—would become the first place I remember consciously experiencing racism. Not microaggressions, not ambiguous discomfort, but the gut-punch of exclusion, dismissal, and silence in the face of harm.

I had accepted what felt like a dream position. The role aligned with everything I’d been working toward professionally. On paper, it was ideal. But behind the postcard imagery was a place that clung tightly to homogeneity. I was an outsider in more ways than one—a Cuban American woman, a multilingual educator, a spiritual person navigating overwhelmingly white, conservative professional spaces. The energy there was suffocating. Outside of my classroom, it felt like I was moving through cold, torrential, blinding rain—one of those Florida storms that soaks you before you can blink. I couldn’t see clearly. I couldn’t breathe. My only refuge was the sanctuary I created in my classroom, where the walls were lined with thriving plants, affirmations, and the protective rituals I quietly practiced. Within that space, I could just *be*. But the moment I stepped outside, it was as if I had no armor.

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My body began to respond before I could fully name what was happening. The panic attacks increased. I started getting physically sick—an embodied response to an environment that was eroding my spirit. I was living in contradiction: surrounded by natural beauty, working in a role I had once dreamed of, and yet feeling more invisible, more unwell, and more spiritually displaced than ever before.

It was in the midst of this unraveling that I received my acceptance into a competitive, federally funded doctoral cohort at Florida International University. I became a full-time student just days before the world shut down due to COVID-19. As everything collapsed globally, I entered a new threshold of learning and unlearning. The timing was eerie but divine. I had been unraveling long before the world did. The doctoral program gave me the language, the theory, and the community to begin making sense of the storm I had just come through—and the many others I had survived.

The Doctoral Journey Begins

Originally, I had applied for, been accepted for, and intended to be a full-time doctoral student in Project INCLUDE, an OSEP-funded doctoral cohort at a Hispanic Serving Institution in South Florida, but with the pandemic, I was concerned how my family's finances and health insurance would be impacted, so I fought to remain employed and for the time being, be a part-time doctoral student instead.

*I will use *** as a way to note a transition from the narrative to a brief explanation of each study of my three-manuscript dissertation.*

Study 1. Quickly, my dissertation focus became the disproportionality in gifted education, which I saw from a distance in my former district and was immersed in at my new district. I began researching disproportionality in Florida, which led me to my first study - a quantitative study that analyzed the relationship between teacher race and ethnicity with the identification of students from diverse backgrounds, focused mainly on students who were Black, Latinx, and Asian.

Meanwhile, I was trying to avoid my toxic school environment while keeping my family safe and navigating my first semester, so I applied and was accepted to be part of a district virtual school. There, I found an oasis during these challenging times.

My principal there was wonderful and supportive. I was able to carry out a pilot program for schoolwide enrichment, as well as take on the role of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) coordinator, which equipped me with a true understanding of the layers in Response to Intervention (RTI), all the while working from my home office that housed my spiritual tools and altar. I had the best teaching year ever culminating with being voted teacher of the year. Under my principal's leadership, I truly came to understand how essential it is to one's success to have your administrator's support. Despite all the difficulties during the pandemic, I was flourishing professionally, but as Florida relaxed its pandemic precautions, the district virtual school was dissolved, despite its enormous success, and we were returned to our original workplaces.

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Feeling Latinx

Initially, the return to my school site went well with my new principal's support. I began implementing schoolwide enrichment slowly. He also supported my doctoral pursuits by supporting my attendance to conferences, paying for my memberships to organizations like the National Association for Gifted Children, and mainly by allowing my schedule to have a free period at the end of the day that would allow me to leave school early and drive back to Miami on days I had class.

I was doing well academically and professionally; I was putting into action what I was researching and writing about.

I opened up alternative pathways to the gifted and talented/enrichment program. The first change I made was providing access to students who pre-qualified for gifted identification, but who did not receive the needed qualifying Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores to be formally placed.

This expanded the program a lot, but I realized we were still missing many of the student demographics I was trying to provide access to. So, I opened another pathway for students in special education and those who were in English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes. For this pathway, the student needed to have good grades and the recommendation of either their special education teacher or their ESOL teacher. This made a bigger difference, and the children were happy because they felt included. Their self-confidence increased, along with their grades.

Next, I was expanding the enrichment curriculum I used, which was a collaboration with an environmental program, The Fairchild Challenge, housed and hosted by a local botanical garden, Fairchild Tropical Botanic Gardens. The program was available to any teacher interested in including it in their class curriculum via a professional learning community I created. I was well on my way to creating a schoolwide enrichment program that provided students with learning opportunities that included field trips to museums, botanical gardens, and other experiences.

However, every year that I had been there, I faced the biased, racist tendencies of some of the teachers as they overly disciplined my Latinx gifted students for absurd things like wearing hoodies and continuously barring the students in ESOL from enrichment opportunities. Now, with these programs going forward, their prejudice revamped once again, solely directed towards my multilingual Latinx students considered English learners. Some of these teachers exploited the fact that students had entered my enrichment program through alternative pathways. They used this as justification to remove them, often placing them in remedial interventions that were not only misaligned, but demeaning. Yet, the administration turned a deaf ear because of the successful test scores from some of these teachers.

Study 2. This led me from my first study to my second one that looked at the access that multilingual learners labeled as English learners have to advanced education. The second study was initially supposed to be a pilot study, using my current educational setting as my focus, but I was persuaded to pursue a systematic literature review due to time constraints.

During this time, I was discreet about my beliefs because I thought the academic world and the spiritual world could not exist in the same space, and I was afraid of jeopardizing any possibilities that might come from these intersecting paths. However, I had begun hiding evidence of my spiritual practices in my classroom: I had crystals hidden; my angel card deck

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always with me; I diffused essential oils; I had an inside garden; I hung paintings with spiritual significance that created emotional portals to other times and places that were positive.

Towards the end of the school year, I felt myself distancing from the school again. I felt my principal's support waning. Whereas I had previously been supported by the school to leave early in order to attend my doctoral classes in Miami, the following school year - when I was preparing to take my comprehensive exams to advance to candidacy - that support was no longer offered. Additionally, the conferences were now being questioned, and I just felt that a change was on the horizon which began causing me anxiety again.

The Summer of Changes, Biopsy, and Testimonio

Then that summer of 2022, I had a breast cancer scare following my yearly screening. A concerning area was found, and a biopsy was ordered. The trauma of a biopsy procedure is often kept quiet – or at least I had never heard how intense that experience is and had even compartmentalized my own memories of biopsies in other areas.

Throughout the traumatic process I could only think that we women are often conditioned to think things like birthing, painful Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), menopause, biopsies, cancer treatments, and so many other procedures, are best reflected in us if we carry them with some idea of grace and composure. Well, f- that. Enduring that biopsy was scary and painful and traumatizing. Thankfully, what they found was benign and the only evidence of it is a tiny mark on my breast and a yearly visual of a metal clip they left inside me to mark the location.

Before my yearly exam ever happened, I had made plans to create a writing retreat for a small group of doctoral peers and friends at a nearby oasis I had discovered through Airbnb and introduced me to Sandra, the owner. The space was tucked into the residential areas framed by the canopies of trees and adorned with the local royal blue peacocks often seen in Pinecrest besides Old Cutler Road and close to Fairchild Tropical Botanic Gardens. There I had found Sandra's home, which felt like a healing sanctuary within a hectic city. This is where I ended up coming to heal and transform. This is where one of my doctoral sisters, engaged in testimonio work, caught my interest in what I thought was a kind of writing. Now, years later, I know that testimonio work is more of a spiritual endeavor that delves deep into the experiences that lead us to who we are and where we are. It is a writing that can be freeing, painful, cathartic, enlightening, empowering, and imbued with resistance.

Study 3. Via this scare, coinciding with my third year in the doctoral program and what would be my final year in K-12 classrooms, I found Gloria Anzaldúa and testimonio, and my worlds began to merge. My research began to expand from quantitative studies and systematic literature reviews, towards a post-qualitative inquiry, woven within a testimonio of resistance. It included all of my work until then. It propped up the belief systems forming my foundation in persisting and resisting systemic bias within the ivory towers of K-12 and academia that are perpetually trying to marginalize Latinas.

This post-qualitative inquiry shared the experiences of Cuban/Caribbean Latinx teachers, within a heroic context, resisting barriers and how those barriers are formed as they navigate advanced educational spaces, and how that resistance to those barriers were formed through belief systems (e.g., spirituality, religion) that provided them with the emotional strength to overcome obstacles. Specifically, using a visual testimonio of resistance (Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), I documented my own experiences along with five other Caribbean Latina (special) educators with a combination of digital pláticas (e.g., Fierros &

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Delgado Bernal, 2016; Martínez-Roldán & Quiñones, 2016) or as more commonly referred to in the Caribbean, conversaciones; visuals and art (e.g., Anzaldúa, 2015; Muñoz, 2017); and papelitos guardados journaling (e.g., Latina Feminist Group, 2001) or notas as is more commonly used in the Caribbean. The visual testimonios documented the participants' (a) experiences (e.g., their roles as cultural brokers, advocates, and agents of access for gifted multilingual learners); (b) different forms of aggression endured; (c) how they resist; and (d) the belief systems that help them to persist.

La Résistance

I took a deep dive into testimonio work and aligned myself with resistance, which had been an ally all along. I returned to my school site, changed. When the racist diatribes ramped up again, my intolerance towards them became much more visible. I was no longer trying to fit in. As a Cuban American woman in white academia, I realized I no longer needed to change who I am to be present in these spaces. I think that somewhere inside of me I knew I needed to be fully present with my work. I had to leave the classroom to be the full-time doctoral student I had initially intended to be. So, when the teachers removed my students in ESOL yet again from my enrichment class, I pushed back, called meetings with school counselors, ESOL teachers, and the principal. Everyone explained to the principal that it was detrimental to pull students from my program simply because they had spent the summer in Mexico speaking Spanish and scored lower on the first diagnostic test of the year. Just days after returning, these students were often removed from enrichment and placed into repetitive, demeaning remedial interventions focused on phonics. It didn't seem to matter, though.

Except this year, I was done yielding – I spoke to parents who were concerned and upset, and suggested they head to the principal's office and not leave until they were seen and heard. This worked for some but not all: especially me. I was eventually called into his office, where he sat alongside his two APs, staring at me like a firing squad ready to fire. When asked why I had told parents to head to his office, I replied:

I thought like a mother and as a mother, I knew they needed to understand how to advocate for their children because it isn't the ones who come from affluent, primarily English-speaking homes where the mom is a PTA board member that need help navigating the system, it is these parents that do.

They didn't have much to say after that except “don't do that anymore.”

The End of a Chapter and Beginning of a New One

Despite the pretend truce, it was clear my principal was upset with me. His dislike towards me grew increasingly visible, and my anxiety grew alongside it.

I started getting physically sick on my way to work, and it bled into all areas of my life. I had already been dealing with a lot personally because my mother had been diagnosed with Parkinson's in March 2021 and every few months, she would come live with us during a medicine tweak or during times of uncertainty that she might be experiencing. Now, on top of all of it, this.

I began looking into the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and was told I was eligible for it. I was asked if I wanted it to be intermittent or consecutive, and I opted for intermittent,

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allowing me to spend some time with my students, whom I did not want to leave, but knew I could not sustain much more. So, in Fall 2023, I submitted FMLA paperwork due to urgent caregiving responsibilities for my mother. On November 15th, HR sent an email confirming my pre-approval for intermittent FMLA leave. The very next day, I began receiving sudden, punitive messages from administration: a denial of my Professional Growth Plan (PGP)—which had previously been verbally approved—and an unexpected demand to schedule my formal observation within weeks. My attendance at a professional conference, which had also been approved months earlier and recorded in the system, was abruptly revoked. I had a panic attack at the airport, but I still presented because I had made a commitment. I later learned I had been docked for those days, which were changed from professional to personal without explanation. The union stepped in, and some of those days were eventually restored—months later.

Though my formal observation went well, I was given nearly all “2s” on my evaluation, in stark contrast to my previous Highly Effective ratings and Teacher of the Year recognition. My intermittent FMLA, which had been set to begin in January, was moved up after my husband—who was my mother’s caregiver while I worked—was hospitalized over Thanksgiving weekend. I submitted updated schedules ahead of time, collaborated with the substitute teacher, and did everything I could to minimize disruption for students.

Throughout my time at that school, I received no disciplinary warnings or infractions. And still, I was made to feel disposable. My efforts to build an inclusive program that served all students—particularly those often overlooked—were systematically devalued. Yet, even in that hostile environment, my students thrived. They presented to NASA scientists, earned top research awards, and helped secure a permanent greenhouse for future enrichment programming. I did the work I was hired to do—and more—until the very end.

In 2018, I had been hired to diversify the staff and gifted program at this school—a program that, at the time, did not reflect the multilingual and multicultural student population it served. I came with no gifted experience, was given no curriculum or guidance, and yet I built an award-winning enrichment program from scratch, rooted in environmental science, philosophy, the arts, and multilingualism. Over five years, I secured over \$20,000 in grant funding, expanded the gifted program from 42 to over 80 students, and created opportunities for historically underserved learners, particularly multilingual learners considered English Learners and students in special education.

Despite my credentials—multiple certifications, two graduate degrees in special education, and doctoral studies in progress—I faced constant obstacles. I was undermined by administrators, unsupported when advocating for my students, and punished after my FMLA was announced.

And yet, I never stopped advocating. I never stopped creating. My students who had been given a safe space to be themselves, to dream, to feel validated, went back into traditional structures. The greenhouse the students fought so hard for was supposed to be installed the year I left, but I don’t think it ever was. The partnership with Fairchild: gone. The schoolwide enrichment program I envisioned would carry on collapsed in my absence. The pathways labored with love to create access and equity metamorphosized back into the elitist structures I had been asked to change when I was hired. And the only Latina gifted teacher in the district was gone, leaving a culturally invalidating demographic in charge.

What emerged from these tensions was my own methodology - one rooted in survival, story, and resistance. These cracks—these rajaduras—are where my research was born. The silences, the denials, the erasures—they called me to testimonio as both method and memory. I

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remained committed to building something beautiful and affirming for students like me: multilingual, creative, and underestimated. They showed me how stories like mine, like my students', often go untold or get told by someone else.

This is also why not only do I insist on telling my story my way, but I also challenge the structure of academia that tries to dictate how my story should be told. I find myself, as Keating (2012) writes, “torn between theories, divided among worldviews, in love with authors and philosophers who rarely (if ever) speak to one another or even acknowledge one another’s work” (p. 18). Yet, still, I bring them into conversation. I (try to) align Campbell and Anzaldúa, and Buddhism with La Regla de Osha. I draw from multiple traditions because no single lens contains the fullness of who I am as a Cuban American woman, daughter of immigrants, curious spiritual student, scholar, and mother. My scholarship is not separate from my life. It emerges from it. It insists on it.

Through testimonio, I reclaim my own voice and join a collective one of students and educators navigating these same fractures. The ones fighting to belong, to create, to resist in love.

As I reflected on what helped me survive the challenges and uncertainties along this journey, I return to the metaphor of the Cuban *ajiaco*: a slow-simmering stew, rich with diverse ingredients, where each flavor deepens the whole. Like Keating (2012), “I want to make these connections, draw these disparate worldviews into dialogue, create these synergistic conversations among areas of thought and perspectives that too often are kept far apart” (p. 18). I write from these in-between spaces, these ruptures that collide or pull away from one another, giving way to something else, something different.

This is where the different parts of me -academic and spiritual, personal and political - coexist. It is here I learned that my testimonio could hold all of me: the scholar, the *bruja*, the mother, the wife, the daughter. All of me. And so, I gave myself the permission to be all of me within my work and beyond it.

This is my story from the cracks, *las rajaduras* (Anzaldúa, 2015) – one voice to join the collective chorus of voices seeking to shift paradigms and disrupt the powers that try to force us to assimilate, hide, and silence who we are. “Living within and among multiple worlds, [I use my] frictional existence and discomfort to create alternative perspectives - ideas, theories, actions, and/or beliefs that contain yet exceed either/or thinking” (Keating, 2012, p. 14).

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Author Notes

Alejandra A. Fernández Morgado, Ph.D.
ORCID: 0009-0000-4539-4347
University of Minnesota-Duluth
aafernan@d.umn.edu

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